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Activities of the United Nations Communications Group in 2004

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

Established in 2002 at the initiative of the Secretary-General, the United Nations Communications Group has emerged as a strong unifying platform for dealing with common communications challenges facing the United Nations. It holds regular meetings at United Nations Headquarters, where current communications issues are discussed. It also meets once a year at rotating locations, at the principals level, to discuss policy issues and to agree on common responses and programmes of activity. In addition, several issue-based task forces work throughout the year to develop and carry out communications strategies. Thus, by integrating communications resources of the United Nations system and devising practical measures through which to share expertise, the Group functions as a close-knit information network, giving United Nations communicators a practical tool with which to more effectively carry out their work.

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I. Introduction

1. In paragraph 59 of its resolution 59/126 B of 10 December 2004, the General Assembly encouraged the Department of Public Information of the United Nations Secretariat to continue to work within the United Nations Communications Group to coordinate the implementation of communication strategies with the heads of information of the agencies, funds and programmes of the United Nations system, and requested the Secretary-General to report to the Committee on Information at successive sessions on the activities of the Group. The present report, prepared in compliance with that resolution, covers the activities of the Group from March 2004 to February 2005.

2. The United Nations Communications Group, established in January 2002 at the initiative of the Secretary-General, has emerged as an important platform for inter-agency coordination in the field of public information and communications. Flexible in its approach and issue-driven, the Group provides a forum for its members within which to debate and to decide on a common course of action on the current communications challenges facing the Organization. In addition to holding an annual session, the Group has created a number of task forces to coordinate the planning and implementation of joint communications strategies on priority issues. It also holds regular meetings at United Nations Headquarters to discuss issues of current interest. Its secretariat is provided by the Department of Public Information.

II. Third annual meeting

3. The third annual meeting of the United Nations Communications Group, co-hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the secretariat of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), was held at the United Nations Office at Nairobi on 24 and 25 June 2004. The meeting provided a forum for a broad discussion on information strategies to be adopted and tools to be used for their implementation in the evolving political and media environment. Forty-two participants representing 36 agencies, programmes and funds of the United Nations system, along with the Department of Public Information and the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa of the United Nations Secretariat, and the United Nations Development Group Office, took part in the meeting.

4. The question of the relevance of the United Nations was at the centre of deliberations. The United Nations Communications Group recognized that the United Nations remained the world's only universal system created to address common global problems and that its centrality in global matters was universally accepted. It was important for United Nations communicators to remind their audiences that the success or failure of the United Nations should not be viewed through the prism of a single issue. At the same time, in order to reduce the gap between the expectations people had of the United Nations, and what the Organization was able to deliver, it was also necessary for United Nations communicators to convey the limitations of the United Nations, in addition to its accomplishments. The Group agreed that one of the key communications challenges before the United Nations system was to draw the world's attention to the many untold or underreported stories relating to the Organization's work. In this regard, the "Top Ten Stories the World Should Hear More About" initiative, launched by the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information on World

Press Freedom Day 2004, was a useful tool that should be continued and strengthened. The members of the Group also agreed to continue to use the Group as the common communications platform of the United Nations system for this purpose.

5. The other broad policy issue considered at the meeting was the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) (A/57/304, annex). The Group agreed that United Nations communicators should convey clear, simple and consistent messages which would help the African people to understand their responsibilities in shaping their future. A proposed advocacy and communications strategy being developed by the Partnership secretariat and the Office of the Special Adviser on Africa would form the general framework for a single common United Nations system communications strategy for the Partnership, the meeting decided.

6. The meeting also considered a communications strategy for the Millennium Development Goals Campaign. It was agreed that the overall purpose of the United Nations system Campaign was to generate awareness and mobilization around the Millennium Development Goals globally and nationally, as well as to build support for the 2005 five-year follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit. It was agreed that the campaign should have a visual identity and a common slogan. The Department of Public Information would carry out follow-up work in close contact with the Millennium Development Goals Campaign office. It was also agreed that a clearing house would be established within the Department of Public Information to maintain a central list and calendar of United Nations system events and promotional initiatives under way. The United Nations family would focus on one or two promotional events to give visibility to the Millennium Development Goals, in addition to the 2005 five-year follow-up to the outcome of the Millennium Summit.

7. The meeting reviewed several ongoing inter-agency initiatives and adopted action plans, including:

(a) The Global Media AIDS Initiative (GMAI). Growing out of a meeting of high-level media executives with the Secretary-General (New York, 15 January 2004), GMAI has evolved into a major international initiative for coordinating HIV/AIDS-related media efforts and partnerships. United Nations Communications Group members agreed to promote the Fifteenth International AIDS Conference in Bangkok (11-16 July 2004) and other Initiative activities;

(b) The United Nations Communications Group calendar of media events. The Department of Public Information has proposed that a new United Nations system calendar of events replace the current one, which is updated only twice a year. The new calendar will be a "live document" offering, via the Internet, unified information regarding meetings, conferences, launches of flagship publications and special events that can be readily shared among all Group members. It was agreed that the new calendar would be introduced before the end of 2004;

(c) Expo 2005 (Aichi, Japan, 25 March-25 September 2005). It was agreed that the United Nations system, led by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), would collectively participate in Expo 2005. The United Nations Communications Group Consultative Group for Expo 2005 would remain the principal forum for consultation and coordination. The United Nations Coordinator for Expo 2005 would communicate through this Consultative Group, either at pre-arranged meetings or via e-mail, once a month;

(d) The United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS). The Service, despite the high quality and effectiveness of its work, continues to face a steady erosion of its funding (as much as one third of its annual budget). The United Nations Communications Group members agreed to look into ways to make increased contributions to the Service. They also asked the Service to pursue alternative sources of funding;

(e) Public opinion surveys. The meeting agreed that global public opinion polls could serve as a way to evaluate the impact of past United Nations communications efforts. This impact — defined as changes in knowledge, attitude and social behaviour — may ultimately be determined only by tracking global public opinion. The United Nations Communications Group task force on public opinion surveys has already taken the first steps towards involving internationally known pollsters for this purpose. The meeting agreed that the work of the task force, led by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), should continue and be strengthened. It recommended that the task force contact internationally known pollsters, such as the Pew Research Institute, in addition to those that had already been approached, for pro bono surveys on United Nations-related questions.

8. The meeting also agreed to support the promotion of the UNEP International Photographic Competition on the Environment 2004-2005, sponsored by Canon, and the Summit on a Mine-Free World, to be held in Nairobi from 29 November to 3 December 2004. Other decisions include the development and adoption of common guidelines for the United Nations system on the use and distribution of United Nations photos, as well as on media accreditation at official United Nations meetings. The Department of Public Information agreed to take the lead in drafting these guidelines. The meeting agreed to hold its next annual meeting in Geneva in July 2005, to be hosted by the International Labour Organization (ILO).

9. In a users' survey conducted by the Evaluation and Communications Research Unit of the Department of Public Information, United Nations Communications Group members agreed that the Group was an effective coordination tool. They hailed the central discussion on the relevance of the United Nations as the most valuable exchange for all participants. They also agreed that most presentations were important for their work. Without exception, survey respondents applauded the hosts in Nairobi for the ample networking opportunities provided at the meeting. Nearly all respondents commented that the meeting had been productive.

III. Ongoing activities

A. Task forces

10. *Public opinion surveys*. The task force, created at the second annual meeting of the United Nations Communications Group (24 and 25 June 2003), looked into the ways and means for the United Nations system to use opinion surveys as a communications tool with which to guide policies and programmes, including consideration of targeting youth. Since polls are costly, the Group had asked the task force to consider ways to pool resources, tap outside expertise and seek pro bono assistance. Consequently, four polling organizations were contacted: Global Barometer, GlobeScan (formerly Environics International), Princeton Survey Research Associates, and Zogby International. Of these, Zogby International agreed

to include six questions relating to the Millennium Development Goals and the United Nations in future opinion polls that they would conduct in Africa, the Arab world, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the United States of America. The first available poll was held in the Arab world, covering Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates (see table). Task force participants were asked to submit suggestions for questions for the poll, and then to indicate their preferences for 6 out of the 14 questions suggested.

11. In the six questions provided to Zogby International, respondents were asked to indicate: (a) how favourable their overall opinion was of the United Nations; (b) how much information about the United Nations they had received from the Arab media; (c) how good a job the United Nations was doing to reduce poverty; (d) how good a job the United Nations was doing to ensure that all children completed primary education; (e) how good a job the United Nations was doing to combat HIV/AIDS; and (f) whether they were aware of the Millennium Development Goals. The initial results of the survey were presented at the annual meeting. The final results, presented by Zogby International in a comprehensive report, were distributed later to United Nations Communications Group members.

Public opinion survey conducted by Zogby International (June 2004), selected Arab countries: responses to the question, In general, is your overall opinion of the United Nations very favourable, somewhat favourable, somewhat unfavourable or very unfavourable?

	Favourable			*Unfavourable*			
	Overall	*Very*	*Somewhat*	*Overall*	*Very*	*Somewhat*	*Not sure*
Lebanon	**55**	26	29	**39**	10	29	7
Egypt	**47**	10	37	**27**	22	5	27
Jordan	**46**	9	37	**50**	25	25	5
Saudi Arabia	**28**	2	26	**71**	31	40	1
United Arab Emirates	**21**	3	18	**68**	30	38	10
Morocco	**15**	1	14	**80**	41	39	5

12. *Millennium Development Goals*. The task force on the Millennium Development Goals, created after the 2003 annual meeting of the United Nations Communications Group, worked towards developing a communications strategy to promote the Millennium Development Goals at the global and national levels. It adopted the slogan "Keep the promise" for the Millennium Development Goals Campaign and agreed on a common visual identity — a graffiti-style logo — for use by the United Nations system organizations. The task force agreed that there would be no strict guidelines on where the United Nations system Millennium Development Goals logo would appear on a cover or on a page, or how it would stand relative to other logos. It was likewise decided to maintain for the present the term "Millennium Development Goals" rather than adopt a broader but less familiar nomenclature.

13. *News footage*. A more recent example of collaboration within the United Nations Communications Group framework has been the establishment of a working group on video footage. Since the working group first met in March 2004, it has

begun to collect and share information with its members on news footage available for immediate use. Thanks to the efforts of the working group, the United Nations system was able to obtain quality footage on the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, the Sudan; on the state of displaced persons in Colombia; and on Chinese peacekeepers in Liberia. The working group was also instrumental in supporting better promotion of events at United Nations Headquarters through the sharing of resources. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) provided footage for the plenary meeting of the General Assembly on global road safety and the meeting organized by the Department of Public Information in conjunction therewith (April 2004) that allowed news producers to cover a story that might have been ignored, had some good visuals not been available.

B. Participation of the United Nations system in Expo 2005

14. Following the decision by the Secretary-General to accept the invitation of the Government of Japan to participate in the 2005 World Exposition, steady progress has been made on United Nations participation. UNESCO, which was designated as the lead United Nations body for the organization of the United Nations Pavilion, appointed a United Nations Coordinator, later confirmed by the Secretary-General as Commissioner-General for Expo 2005. Under the guidelines agreed upon by the United Nations Communications Group on United Nations participation in international exhibitions, all expenses for the United Nations Pavilion are to be underwritten by the host Government. To this end, a memorandum of understanding on United Nations participation was signed by the Government of Japan and the United Nations in February 2004.

15. The Government of Japan has helped identify a private sector sponsor, the Japan Arteriosclerosis Prevention Fund, which will contribute $2.5 million towards the organization of the United Nations Pavilion. It will contribute another $0.5 million towards the establishment of a special section within the Pavilion devoted to health-related issues, more specifically, non-communicable diseases (for example, arteriosclerosis, diabetes and other ageing-related ailments).

16. The overall theme of Expo 2005 is "Nature's Wisdom". Within the framework of this theme, the focus of the United Nations Pavilion will be "Celebrating Diversity", drawing on both cultural diversity and natural diversity, and their interdependence. Exhibits, programme activities and special events will reflect the theme of diversity in ways that complement the overall goal of promoting understanding and awareness of the importance of diversity in our lives, and the need to preserve global common goods.

17. The United Nations system will be given 3 modules comprising 2.5 modules for the exclusive use of the United Nations and up to 0.5 of a module for the special exhibition on health-related issues. The centrepiece of the pavilion will be an art gallery, which will contain video art exhibits related to the main theme of the exposition. There will also be a multimedia education centre, which will offer visitors an opportunity to learn about the diverse work of the United Nations. Every day, throughout the Expo, there will be film screenings, special events and performances in the United Nations Pavilion Theatre, as well as temporary exhibits on a wide range of subjects. As many as 20 United Nations Communications Group members are providing exhibit material and arranging special events for Expo 2005.

C. Regular meetings

18. The principal forum through which the United Nations Communications Group members interact with each other is the weekly meeting held at United Nations Headquarters under the chairmanship of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. These meetings, which bring together a large number of Group members, including representatives of funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system and senior officials of the Executive Office of the Secretary-General, allow the Group members to examine current communications challenges, review them from various perspectives and devise coordinated responses.

19. During the period under review, the Group met 31 times and covered a wide range of topics, including, the post-war developments in Iraq, the Oil-for-Food Programme inquiry, the International Criminal Court, the *Human Development Report 2004*,[1] the humanitarian crisis in Darfur and United States/United Nations relations. Guest speakers, from both within and outside the United Nations system, included Jeffrey Sachs, Adviser to the Secretary-General and Director, Millennium Project; Ana Teresa Romero, Acting Director, ILO office for the United Nations, New York; Dr. David Heymann, WHO Director-General's Representative for Polio Eradication; Amir Dossal, Executive Director, United Nations Fund for International Partnerships; and Robert Orr, Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Coordination and Strategic Planning. Their presentations, followed by open exchanges with United Nations communicators, provided unique insights on issues of current concern and promoted understanding and agreement on strategic responses. The minutes of the meetings were posted on a web site dedicated to the Group and distributed via e-mail to over 400 recipients, including the network of United Nations information centres and communications staff of the United Nations system organizations away from United Nations Headquarters.

D. United Nations Communications Group away from Headquarters

20. At the initiative of the Department of Public Information, steps have been taken to form mini-United Nations Communications Groups for United Nations system members at the national and regional levels. The network of United Nations information centres, including the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels, are taking the lead in convening meetings of United Nations communications staff to discuss, plan and carry out joint communications tasks unique to their respective regions. Over 80 per cent of the United Nations information centres reported having convened meetings of the local United Nations country team communications staff on a regular basis. The information centres also receive communications advisories, including media guidelines and other documents circulated by the Group.

IV. Conclusion

21. Since its creation three years ago, the United Nations Communications Group has emerged as a strong unifying platform for United Nations communicators. This is a practical tool that allows them to pool their resources, share expertise, exchange ideas, and undertake joint action. While the organizations of the United Nations system work in different fields, their work is guided by the priorities set by the General Assembly and the Secretary-General. As communicators, their overriding goal is to develop a common voice reflected in common strategies, but this can happen only through their being brought together in a common forum. The Group serves this indispensable role.

Notes

[1] New York, Oxford University Press, 2004.